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THE PIANOFORTE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON MODERN MUSIC

By EDWARD J. DENT

*O maledetto, o abbominoso ordigno,
Che fabbricato nel tartareo fondo
Fosti per man di Belzebù maligno
Che ruinar per te disegnò il Mondo,
All' Inferno, onde uscisti, ti rassigno.*

ARIOSTO, *Orlando Furioso*, IX., xci.

I.

IT is generally agreed that the English are an unmusical race, but they have at any rate enjoyed a considerable reputation as inventors of labour-saving appliances. It is therefore not surprising that a tradition which seems to be fairly generally accepted by musical historians ascribes to England the invention of the earliest musical instrument in which a row of strings was caused to sound by mechanism actuated from a keyboard. The exact date of this invention cannot be fixed, nor is it certain whether the strings were plucked, as in the harpsichord, or struck with tangents as in the clavichord; but it is generally ascribed to the beginning of the thirteenth century, if not earlier. It was probably in England also that a special system of tablature-notation for the organ was invented, of which a specimen has come down to us belonging to the first half of the fourteenth century, a hundred years before the first known specimens of organ music on the continent. A third point of interest is that among the instruments belonging to Henry VIII was "a virginall that goethe with a whele without playing uppon"—presumably the earliest known ancestor of the pianola.

These three landmarks in the early history of the pianoforte are characteristic, because they show at once the essentially mechanical nature of the instrument. Our ordinary staff notation is in its origin vocal, being derived by uninterrupted steps from the Greek accents. Sol-fa systems, whether we take Guido's or Miss Glover's, are merely mnemonic devices to assist the singer in

imagining the sounds he has to sing. But tablatures of all kinds—primitive organ tablatures, lute tablatures, recorder tablatures, the modern mandoline tablatures to be found in the back streets of Naples, or the new system of pianoforte notation invented by Ferruccio Busoni—imply a totally different principle in the minds of those who use them. A singer, a violinist, a trombone or horn player, playing from the staff, is obliged to imagine a definite sound before he can make it; a player from tablature might be utterly incapable of distinguishing one musical sound from another, much less of imagining a definite musical sound in his brain, and yet execute a piece of music correctly by following accurately the directions given for the motions of his fingers. The keyboard once invented and developed to a certain stage of easy manipulation, there was nothing surprising in the invention of Henry VIII's automatic player. From virginal to pianola is a much smaller step than from voice to virginal.

The keyboard was a labour-saving device. In the early days of the organ it enabled one man to admit air to several pipes simultaneously by the movement of a single key: later, as the keyboard attained the modern form, a single player could control at once as many as four or even more of these different sets of pipes—at any rate as long as he had some one else to provide the instrument with wind. Additional labour for the supply of wind was inevitable. If nature had provided man with four sets of vocal cords so that he might sing four part harmony by himself, he would have required in addition a corresponding increase of lung capacity and muscular strength. One man at the organ might control what would have been the work of four singers, but he could not create it.

The adaptation of strings to the keyboard brought about an entirely different situation. The technique of the organ assumed as a matter of course that its sounds were sustained as consistently as they would have been by voices. The organist could not vary the loudness of a note while he held it; but as long as he held it, his collaborators at the bellows could ensure its continuity of sound. The harpsichord¹ on the other hand made no attempt at continuity of sound. The string once plucked, the sound died rapidly away, just as it did in the case of the lute or harp. But musically, the harpsichord was no more an improvement on the lute and harp than the organ was on a choir of voices. The lute had a peculiar delicacy of tone-colour: the harpsichord could

¹As a matter of convenience I venture to use the word harpsichord as signifying all varieties of keyboard instruments with plucked strings.

imitate this in a rough way, but it could not by the nature of its mechanism obtain any direct variety either of tone-colour or of loudness. Those who have not studied the harpsichord may have a difficulty in realizing this important difference between the harpsichord and the "*cembalo col piano e forte*" which has now taken its place. The loudness of the sound made by a plucked string depends on the amplitude of its vibrations. To make the sound louder, you must pluck the string more violently, that is to say, you must pull it further out of the straight before you let it go. Now in the harpsichord you may thump the keys as violently as you please, but you will make the sound no louder. The string has a certain fixed limit of elasticity, and the quill which plucks it has also its fixed limit of resisting power. At the moment when the string's resistance overcomes that of the quill, the string will be set in vibration. These two limits are not in any way alterable by the rate at which the finger depresses the key.

What then were the advantages of the harpsichord? They were these: the keyboard enabled a musician to indicate at any rate, if not to sustain, a much larger number of notes than the lute, and the comparatively slight resistance which the mechanism offered to the fingers permitted him to execute much more complicated and rapid successions of notes than was possible on the organ. It will at once be seen that these advantages were purely mechanical; they had no artistic value, and indeed involved of necessity the sacrifice of almost all the most essential elements of musical performance. It is probably for this reason that the literature of the harpsichord even in the days when the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book was compiled (early seventeenth century) is very small as compared with that which has come down to us for voices or even for the lute and organ. It is the lute rather than the virginal which occupies in the sixteenth century the place of the pianoforte in the nineteenth, and the most elaborate virtuoso-music for the lute belongs to the seventeenth century, although towards the time of Handel its popularity was certainly on the wane.

The harpsichord had one noteworthy characteristic in common with all stringed instruments which are plucked, and which all these instruments have in common with a group generally regarded as quite apart from them. All plucked strings are instruments of percussion, in that their sound is produced by an initial impact after which it dies away more or less rapidly. Now this initial impact is in all cases extremely violent in proportion to the sound which is still audible after the first shock. In the case of bells

or drums this fact needs no demonstration: in the case of the harpsichord it is less obvious, but still perceptible to a careful listener. As to the pianoforte, we have become so accustomed to regard its tone as the normal quality of musical sound that many people no doubt will say that the initial impact is only violent under the hands of a bad player. This is a point to which I shall return later on.

The psychological effect of the initial impact is a very important factor in the appreciation of music, and it is worth studying from a historical point of view. The disproportionate violence of the sound produced by instruments of this kind causes them to have a peculiarly penetrating effect. Bells are used for all sorts of non-musical purposes, ecclesiastical and secular, because they can be heard at a great distance and can be perceived clearly in the middle of subsidiary noises. This is proportionately true of various other percussion instruments. The roll of a drum, the thrum of a guitar, even the soft thud of a harp are often audible as noises when their distance is too great for them to be recognizable as musical notes. We do not regard the harp as a noisy instrument in the orchestra; but its penetrating power was once made very clear to me in a curious way. Sitting in a room of a house in a quiet London square, the windows shuttered and curtains drawn, I noticed a muffled and indefinable sound recurring at regular intervals. "That is our street band," said the owner of the house. Unbelieving, I opened the front door and looked out; on the further side of the square a violin, cornet and harp were performing. The melody of the cornet and violin at once arrested my attention, and I thought that I hardly heard the harp at all; then, as I listened more carefully, I recognized the rhythmical thud in the bass note at the beginning of each bar. In the street it was merely a soft accompaniment to the violin and cornet; in the house it was the only part of the music that I could hear at all.

The importance of the lute as an influence towards the change which took place in music towards the end of the sixteenth century has long been recognized by historians. But it has not been fully recognized that the change which made itself felt in harmony and tonality was primarily a change of rhythm.

Pure vocal music may obtain its rhythmical effects in two ways, by quantity—some notes being long and others short—or by stress—some notes being loud and others soft.

Modern English depends so largely on stress for its rhythms that many people have a difficulty in realizing quantitative values at all. But quantitative values, however negligible in verse,

cannot be disregarded in singing. This is one of the reasons why singers prefer Italian to English; the Italian language being free from such words as *never*, *women*, *sinister*, *tabernacle*, in which the first syllable must be strongly emphasized, but on no account prolonged. Indeed the more strongly the accented syllable in such words is stressed, the shorter must its actual duration be. Words like these are the despair of translators for music. The natural tendency of vocal music is towards obtaining rhythm by quantity. Stress in singing is a matter of positive difficulty, unless the singer is helped out by the use of words which he is accustomed to stress in speaking. Words of this kind act, we may say, as *plectra* to the vocal cords, and give the voice for the moment something of the value of a percussion instrument.

The vocal music of the madrigal period was written without bars, and in the hands of composers of the first rank attained effects of great rhythmical subtlety by the use of an almost exclusively quantitative method. Every one who has sung madrigals knows that the bar lines of modern editions must be systematically disregarded. The madrigal composers had, however, one other rhythmical device of great importance, the suspension or prepared discord. When one voice has, as it were, to push past another in a narrow place, an effect of resistance to be overcome is produced, which results in a sort of stress. Hence the systematic employment of suspensions in the music of the Palestrina period to mark cadences.¹

Just as modern music of all kinds is arranged for the pianoforte, so in the sixteenth century all kinds of music were arranged for the lute and the virginal. Modern teachers of composition have said that to arrange an orchestral piece for the pianoforte is a safe test of its musical value. It would be interesting to know what the teachers of the sixteenth century thought about arranging madrigals for the lute. The suggestion implied is that all the essentials of the musical thought are present in the pianoforte arrangement. Yet any one who reads the lute and harpsichord arrangements of madrigals will surely agree that it is often very hard to get from them a clear idea of the essential thought of the original composer. For not only is much of the contrapuntal writing necessarily lost, owing to technical considerations, but quantitative values are obscured, and the rhythmical effect of suspensions wholly lost, because the suspended note has almost ceased to be audible at the moment when the percussion of the accompanying dissonance would logically demand its maximum

¹See Edward J. Dent, *Italian Chamber Cantatas*, *The Musical Antiquary*, II, 142.

intensity. A complete rearrangement of rhythmical values is almost bound to be apparent. Yet it is not surprising that these arrangements were accepted, for we accept pianoforte arrangements with probably even greater willingness. An arrangement, whether for lute or pianoforte, is in fact a stimulus to memory and imagination. It might produce little impression on a listener who had never heard the original work before, but to any one who had even a slight recollection of it in its original shape, the proper effects would be supplied mentally and even subconsciously with an amount of ease dependent on the listener's musical experience. Moreover, we must remember that a listener of those days, even if only averagely musical, would have the madrigal style as a permanent general mental background, whereas for us a certain effort of the historical sense is always necessary even when we hear a madrigal sung with a due sense of style.

We may pursue this use of the harpsichord as a stimulus to imagination right down to modern times. As instrumental music developed, so we may trace its advances in the faint reflections given by the harpsichord either in actual arrangements or in independent compositions. Any instrument which has a sharply characterized style is easily reproduceable. As early as the days of Byrd we find trumpet effects written for the virginal, and we may note the gradual change in trumpet style through the trumpet effects in the harpsichord music of Purcell, Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti down to Schubert, Mendelssohn and Chopin or later. It is absurd to suppose that a single sound on harpsichord or pianoforte could ever be mistaken for the sound of a trumpet; but play a familiar and characteristic trumpet phrase, and any one can respond to the stimulus of association.

Harpsichord and pianoforte music is in fact a mirror reproducing whatever is most characteristic of the general state of music for any given age. In the early eighteenth century, the most widespread type of music was the music of the Italian operas: consequently we find that Italian opera is the key to the understanding of the sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti, of Galuppi, Platti and C. P. E. Bach. The modern pianist to whom this period is represented only by a few of Scarlatti's most capricious and difficult pieces will hardly bring himself to believe this statement. Scarlatti is in fact one of the most original composers who ever lived, and one of the most diabolically ingenious in writing for peculiar effects of his instrument; but if we study him on a large scale and approach him by way of the others, after obtaining a first-hand acquaintance with representative Italian

arias, there can be no doubt about his indebtedness to the composers for the stage and their singers.

Let us return for a moment to that other characteristic of the harpsichord to which attention was drawn earlier, its rhythmical or rather accentual value as an instrument of percussion. Its effect on vocal music becomes very apparent with the rise of the monodic style. Except for the work of Lulli and the other writers of music to French words, all recitative without exception, Italian or English, was written in common time, and based on the assumption that there was a strong accent at the beginning of every bar. It was in this new style of vocal music that bar-lines became indispensable. The tendency of song is generally towards rhythm by quantity: the tendency of speech is generally towards rhythm by stress. When therefore musicians began to aim at a more definitely rhetorical style of setting words to music, when they were doing their best to make song conform to the habits of speech, it was inevitable that their music should be based mainly on a system of stress-values, the positions of which were indicated by bar-lines for the eye, and for the ear by chords struck on the accompanying instrument. It was no doubt largely owing to the desire for a sharp contrast with the four-beat rhythm of recitative that the Italian and English composers very soon developed a marked tendency to compose their arias in a rhythm of three beats.

The gradual standardization of the orchestra during the later seventeenth century and its not very remarkable attempts at composition for harpsichord alone might easily lead us to underrate the value of the harpsichord at this period. But wherever there is a figured bass there is the harpsichord, and the harpsichord formed the background of all attempts towards orchestral grouping. Practical experiment shows that the main value of the harpsichord in an orchestra (apart from definitely solo passages such as occur in J. S. Bach) is to give a rhythmical impetus, and this is corroborated in cases where a figured bass part for the harpsichord exists of a much simpler nature than that for the basses of the bowed instruments. It is on this strong sense of regular accent that the whole of Bach and Handel, vocal as well as instrumental, is built. No longer does a discord create an accent: accent justifies a discord, as being the stronger musical force of the two, and all that the discord can do is to help to exaggerate the accent.

II.

From Italian opera both the form and the style of the classical sonata are derived. The idea of thematic development, as practised

by Beethoven, was possible only after the Italians in their desire for dramatic expression had broken up their melodies into short, passionate phrases capable of presentation at different emotional angles, of reiteration and of harmonic emphasis. It was just at this moment that the harpsichord began gradually to give place to the recently invented pianoforte. The pianoforte was the ideal instrument for the reproduction of such rhetorical effects as these. Moreover, Italian opera itself was at a very rhetorical stage. Its principal vice was not, as is too often suggested, the undue elaboration of *coloratura*, but poverty of melody, combined with over-emphatic declamation, in which the natural rhythm of the vocal phrase was distorted by violent syncopations. It was the same weakness that we find in the writing of Weber, though in Weber the fault is aggravated by other complications due largely to the direct influence of the pianoforte. Given such conditions, it was only natural that C. P. E. Bach's pianoforte works should be above all things rhetorical in manner. Their object was to transfer to the domestic keyboard the magnificent gesture of the Italian stage, and so far from disparaging their value we can only admire the skill with which the composer placed effects of such emotional brilliance within the reach of the amateur pianist.

What C. P. E. Bach did on a small scale, Mozart carried out with greater detail and a far wider range of genuine poetic emotion. It need hardly be pointed out that Mozart must be judged not by his pianoforte sonatas but by his concertos. The pianoforte concerto, which reached its perfection in his hands, shows even in the eighteenth century something of that intense striving for personality of expression which is one of the characteristics of the romantic movement. However passionate the utterance of the orchestra, it is the business of the solo pianoforte to show itself master of an even more poignant vehemence. The mere sight of the master seated at the keyboard gave a certain illusion of the very act of creation—an illusion of which the fullest advantage was taken in later years by Liszt. The introductory *ritornello*, so perfunctory in its original place as the prelude to a vocal solo, here could produce, especially when planned by the careful ingenuity of a Mozart, an effect of genuine poetic value, so that when the pianoforte entered and elaborated its themes, the singing voice of the orchestra was still present in imagination to the audience while they listened to the solo, though the actual sounds produced by the pianoforte were in themselves only a rattling of dry bones. It was the imagination of the audience that clothed them with flesh, while the player at the keyboard

by his command of purely rhetorical effect, could enhance their emotional value to an immeasurable extent.

The pianoforte was indeed the typical instrument of the romantic movement. Changes in music are not due merely to the haphazard invention of new instruments such as the double-action harp or the valve-horn. The instruments are invented because composers want them in order to express certain ideas. When the new instruments are in being they may, however, exercise a considerable influence in certain directions, because the devices for which they were invented become over-emphasized and stereotyped. The pianoforte of Beethoven's day was not remarkable for beauty of tone, as compared with modern instruments. But it suited the romantic composers, because it was essentially an instrument for the awakening of associations. Now one of the chief characteristics of romantic music is its dependence on association. Not only did it love to reproduce as best it could sounds really external to music altogether, but it made constant use, especially in its later phase, of genuinely musical effects of a kind which even the unlearned could recognize as having definite association with concrete ideas. Military effects, ecclesiastical effects, horns and all the poetic visions of the German forest, chromatic winds, waves in arpeggios, shepherds' pipes, minstrels' harps, and all the rest of the theatrico-musical Wardour Street of the early nineteenth-century—the pianoforte was the one instrument which could imitate them all. And while it could always imitate them well enough to ensure their recognition, its obvious inability to imitate them exactly could be regarded as providing that touch of unreality which distinguishes the true art of a so-called "camera-study" from the crude realism of a mere photograph.

Beethoven himself, it need hardly be said, was concerned with deeper things than these. But he was none the less keenly aware of the usefulness of the pianoforte in suggesting effects belonging to other instruments, although the effects which he employs are always strictly musical. His sonatas are full of passages which depend for their right understanding on the listener's recollection of the orchestra, sometimes even of a singer. To name only a few of such cases, there is the *tremolo* of low strings at the opening of the "Waldstein," the obvious oboe phrases and repeated horn octaves in the slow movement of the early sonata in D major, the vocal recitatives of the D minor and other sonatas, the horn theme of "Les Adieux." Paradoxical as it may appear, it is to Beethoven's deafness that we owe his

extraordinary development of the possibilities of the pianoforte. Totally indifferent as he must necessarily have been to the actual quality of the sounds produced by the instrument, as compared with the same sounds produced by other instruments, he viewed the pianoforte in its true light, as a mechanical means by which one player could indicate in a convenient and sufficiently intelligible way the huge range of sounds offered by the orchestra. He treated the instrument in his latest period much as he did the string quartet, not with a view of producing works like the quartets of Mozart in which every note is exactly in its right place, and no additional note could ever be added, but as a means of sketching the suggestive outlines of ideas which were too vast for any known means of execution ever to realize completely. To this we owe at any rate his employment of the keyboard to its widest compass, his marvellous variety in the ways of grouping notes under the hands, and perhaps also his original methods of using the pedals. It is in this last device that Beethoven foreshadows most definitely the modern treatment of the instrument.

To us at the present day Beethoven is so essentially the Beethoven of the third period that we can hardly realize how rare were the musicians who grasped that period's significance during the half-century which followed his death. The only composer who seems fully to have understood him was Berlioz, and Berlioz, though he realized the true function of the pianoforte with regard to the orchestra, classing it always with the instruments of percussion, did not compose pianoforte music. Liszt may perhaps have approached him, but Liszt's musical personality is so complex a matter that we cannot regard him as being in the direct line of descent from Beethoven.

There was, however, a fairly clearly-defined "classical" school of pianoforte-playing during the nineteenth century, the members of which based themselves on Mozart and Beethoven, adding as time went on the influences of Bach and Brahms. It was a school very reverent of authority, very unwilling to try experiments, very suspicious of any sort of music which did not conform strictly to a rather narrow tradition. Yet it included certain interpreters whose lofty idealism, cramped as it was, could not be without a lasting influence, and though some of its main principles were fundamentally unsound, the emphasis which it laid upon the purely intellectual side of interpretation may still give us reason to remember it with gratitude, now that the leaders who had the power to give it vitality in the world of music are long since dead.

The pianists of this "classical" school were in a certain sense romantic on fundamental principle. They systematically accepted the doctrine that the sounds of the pianoforte were equivalent in value to the sounds of sustaining instruments. Improvements in mechanism continually gave them additional cause to maintain this doctrine, and a "singing tone," although a physical impossibility, was the object of their constant study. Human nature never finds much difficulty in believing what reason proves to be impossible, and we need not be surprised at the strange results to which this curious habit of thought conduced. It is responsible at a quite early stage for those peculiarly uncomfortable moments in the violin sonatas of Mozart and Beethoven at which the pianoforte delivers the principal melody, supported by single bass notes in the left hand, while the violin fills up the middle with a commonplace figure of accompaniment, in which the most devotedly analytical mind could never pretend to find a thematic value. When the violin plays *pizzicato*, there is no reason to complain of the arrangement; but it seems to have taken composers some little time to discover this device.

It is possible to find occasional places in Beethoven, and even in Mozart, where the characteristic sound of the pianoforte is employed as a rhythmical noise rather than a musical note or combination of notes. In Mozart's *Rondo alla turca* the heavy chords of A major in the left hand near the end obviously represent the big drum, cymbals and triangle, which in German are always called *türkische Musik*; this is not apparent on the pianoforte, but is unmistakable when the movement is played on the harpsichord. Such examples as we may find in Beethoven are generally of the freakish type which Sir George Grove used to associate with the epithet "unbuttoned." Those of the romantics who kept themselves respectable did not perpetuate them; every note struck on the pianoforte was to have its definite musical value as part of a homogeneous harmonic system.

The pianoforte writing of Schumann illustrates this well. Schumann, who thirty or forty years ago was regarded as the greatest of the romantics, is now the least esteemed of a school with which the younger generation seems to feel utterly out of touch. His musical material is commonplace, they say, even vulgar at times: at his best he borrows from Weber and early Beethoven, at his worst he relapses into the slush of German *Studentenlieder*: his orchestral writing is impossible, his songs unendurably sentimental, his treatment of the pianoforte clumsy and monotonous in the extreme. Why then does middle age look

back to Schumann not only as the most lovable of all composers, but as one of the most daring and original, both in musical invention and in the technical handling of the pianoforte above all other instruments? It is a problem which we must try to solve scientifically, without appeals to sentiment, without horror at the iconoclastic tendency of youth.

Schumann is in fact the most complete expression of a certain phase of romanticism. His period had already classified certain ideas as romantic, it knew it was romantic itself, it thought it would be romantic to express those ideas in music. Hence Schumann is one of the most allusive of all romantic composers. His entire personality depends musically on association, and just because he is a pure musician who experiences everything through the medium of music, his allusions and associations are always musical and not realistic. Thus when he wishes to recall some external idea, maternity, young manhood, the German forest, the German Rhine, the idea expresses itself to his mind through the medium of an associated musical sound—a cradle song, a student's song, a fanfare of horns, a vintage song or cathedral music. And so intimately is the idea bound up with the associated melody that he forgets to apply to the melody the ordinary canons of musical criticism. However humble and trivial the song, judged simply as a piece of music, it is immeasurably ennobled in his mind because it symbolizes for him an essentially noble idea. He confuses in fact association (which may be of the most haphazard kind) with direct expression. This is essentially romantic. And this is one reason why Schumann is dead to the younger generation; the ideas are still noble, and will always be so, but the musical themes by which he knew them have lost their significance.

It was only natural then that Schumann should be attracted to the pianoforte above all other instruments. It was, as I have said, the instrument best suited for music dependent on association, and it was the instrument best suited for the expression of that exaggerated rhythmical energy of a very primitive type which is one of Schumann's most striking characteristics. It was his energy and enthusiasm that endeared him to us a generation ago; the humble simplicity of his themes only needed earnestness and conviction of performance to make them sound splendid and inspiring. One of the chief prophets of Schumann in those days used to say contemptuously of Mendelssohn, "the faster you play him the better he sounds"; the younger generation add thereto "and I suppose the more effect you want to get out of Schumann, the louder you must play him."

There is no doubt that the school of pianists who devoted themselves to Beethoven, Schumann and Brahms exercised a very valuable influence among amateurs in developing a manly and intellectual sense of interpretation—an influence perhaps underrated by a generation which is fortunately too young to recollect the epoch of Henri Herz and Brinley Richards. But this influence was valuable only in one direction. It was an influence that in other directions was positively deleterious, in that it encouraged the amateur to take technique for granted, to dash at a composition and give a rough impression of it rather than to study it carefully, to ignore, nay, even to despise what it called “the subtle seductions of colour.” Nor was this influence confined to pianoforte-playing alone. In the days of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven the pianoforte had taken only a small part in the realm of chamber-music; for all three composers the string quartet was the ideal combination of instruments. But from the death of Beethoven to the end of the nineteenth century composers of chamber-music were seldom happy unless they could combine the strings with the pianoforte. The string quartet was not congenial to Schumann and Mendelssohn, and although Brahms and Dvořák practised it with more success, it will probably be admitted by most musicians that their pianoforte trios, quartets and quintets are more characteristic of their genius.

We may indeed see the beginnings of this new development in the later trios of Beethoven. In the trios of Schumann and Mendelssohn the pianoforte is always the leader of the group: the principle is pushed to its extreme in the well-known trio of Tchaikovsky, in conception so touchingly beautiful, so monstrous in execution. The more natural balance of instruments, according to the ideas of that day, is obtained by setting four strings, rather than two or three, to match the pianoforte. But such works as the pianoforte quintets of Schumann, Brahms and César Franck, however much their musical ideas may claim our admiration, inevitably tempted performers into an increasing coarseness and roughness of performance, which could not fail to make itself apparent in string quartets as well. It was lucky that Brahms was able towards the end of his life to find salvation through his newly awakened interest in the clarinet as a chamber-instrument.

Even more serious damage was done in the department of vocal music. The very root and foundation of all music was corrupted, and it may be years before the art recovers from the injury which it has sustained. For the ruin of singing, Wagner has generally been held responsible, and if Wagner is to blame,

Beethoven is partly responsible for leading him astray. But it must be remembered that Beethoven, and even Wagner, wrote at a time when real singing was still respected and studied. It is not every one who can give an adequate performance of the solos or even of the choral parts of the Ninth Symphony and the Mass in D, but on the rare occasions when those works are sung, and really sung, by singers who possess not only the requisite physical strength but an irreproachable vocal technique as well, we realize that Beethoven was cruelly exacting to the human voice only because he knew that the human voice alone could interpret ideas of such vastness and grandeur.

As regards Wagner, it is a matter of common knowledge that he insisted on pure singing from his interpreters. One proof of his appreciation of real singing is the frequent prevalence of sound over sense in his librettos—*Wagalarweia*, *hojotoho* and the rest. Another is his choice of such singers as Heinrich Vogl—the only singer I have ever heard who could interpret Mozart's Don Ottavio—and Lilli Lehmann, who tells us in her autobiography that *Norma* "should be sung and acted with fanatical consecration!" That was in the old days when Wagner was so strange to musicians that he needed full-blooded singing to show how vocal his music really was. But when Wagner's music came to be well-known—thanks no doubt largely to the pianoforte as a disseminator of musical culture—singers (if I may charitably call them so) began to realize the disastrous principle that just as the pianoforte could indicate the sounds which listeners remembered having heard from the orchestra, so they, too, might indicate by a pianoforte treatment of the larynx the sounds which the composer had intended to be sung. It was a style of barking which has been generally associated with Wagner's name, because Wagner's operas were the quickest road to such success as is expressed in terms of lucrative engagements and laudatory press-cuttings: but it was a common disease in all concert-rooms and spread its infection even to English choral singing.

I shall be told that it is absurd to attribute this devastation of the art of singing to the influence of the pianoforte, because Wagner himself was a very mediocre pianist. And it is curious to note in this connection that Brahms, who was at one time a pianist of some repute, was at his very best in writing songs, songs indeed in which the sense of vocal phrase was so powerful that the literary values are often completely dominated by it, whereas his pianoforte writing is in many cases nothing short of barbarous. The fact is that the general musical characteristics of a given

period depend not on the output of its isolated men of genius, but on the general musicianship of the average man both amateur and professional. Viewing musical history from this standpoint, the most notable feature of the nineteenth century is the enormous number of pianofortes, accompanied by a correspondingly vast publication of pianoforte-arrangements. This obviously signifies a corresponding multitude of players, most of whom we can conveniently designate as strummers. It is therefore not surprising that we have subconsciously arrived at the disastrous condition of regarding the pianoforte, rather than the voice, as the normal means of producing music.

III.

Could the complete harpsichord and pianoforte works of J. S. Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms be suddenly obliterated from our knowledge, we might deplore the loss of much immortal music, but we should still feel that the position of those composers (except possibly Schumann) remained unaltered. To treat Domenico Scarlatti, Liszt and Chopin in the same way would be practically to obliterate those composers altogether. To them the keyboard was not just one among many outlets of expression, but almost the only means by which they could convey their ideas to the minds of their audience. Such concentration, even in the case of composers below the first rank, necessarily leads to considerable expansion of the resources offered by the particular instrument. A composer who feels that he has the orchestra at his disposal will probably not want to waste time in trying to obtain from the pianoforte effects which he can more easily obtain elsewhere: he will be content for the most part to proceed on traditional lines, making innovations only when they are the outcome of what is a new thought, not merely a new effect of sound. We see this, generally speaking, in the late works of Beethoven. There are, it is true, certain new colour-effects produced, but they are the result of and almost always completely overshadowed by the expression of the musical thought itself, an expression still based on the classical principle that a note sounded on the pianoforte is fully equivalent to the same note sung or sounded on another instrument.

With Domenico Scarlatti, Liszt and Chopin the case is different. If we accept the common comparison of pianoforte music with black-and-white drawing, we may say that, whereas the classical school insisted on firm outlines, sometimes even on the precision of the architect's office, these other composers adopted

rather the methods of those artists who carefully avoid drawing a single line accurately but obtain vivid and fascinating effects of sunlight and texture by free and bold indication of shadows, leaving the spectator's imagination to complete the picture. They start definitely from the principle that their notes are not real sounds, but merely indications of them; they assume in their hearer's minds a general familiarity with the music of the day, and stimulate imagination, not by attempting to present essential forms, but by ingenious complications of subsidiary and accessory ideas. In this sense Domenico Scarlatti, in spite of his date, in spite of his clear-cut logic, is to be classed as a romantic, little though he may appear to have in common with Liszt. They are romantic in so far as their music is music about music, rather than music about life; they are classical in that they accept their instrument frankly for a sham, and never pretend that it is anything else.

To dissect the personality of Liszt would require a whole volume, and I dare not attempt here more than the roughest indications. His style is derived in the first instance from that of Weber. It is curious that Weber, the feeblest and emptiest of all the romantic composers, should yet have been so outstanding a personality that not a single romantic composer, not even Chopin, who is needless to say by far the greatest of them, can be explained without reference to him. Now Weber, put shortly, is in the main Rossini arranged for the pianoforte. Almost every mannerism that we recognize as typical of Weber may be traced in the airs of *Tancredi* and *Semiramide*, where we may note, perhaps with surprise, the classic dignity of the born Italian, the born singer. Why, one wonders, do these noble and passionate phrases sound so flashy and rhetorical under Weber's fingers? It is because the pianoforte (we must not forget that Weber was a pianoforte virtuoso) gives them a feverish over-emphasis; the indolent barcarolle becomes a leaping waltz, the stately procession a military strut. To this foundation Liszt adds the satanic wizardry of Paganini, the tender sentiment of Schubert (Rossini again, seen through a different temperament) the still tenderer sentimentality of Bellini, later on, a touch of Magyar folk-song, more consciously acquired than innate, in spite of his ancestry, and eventually, the pious musical phraseology of the age which proclaimed the Immaculate Conception and invented the harmonium to sing its praises. It was only a pianist who could assimilate so many influences. They were nearly all second-hand to begin with, and the only way to present them effectively was to treat them as

holy relics, vaporous shapes, faint exhalations, dreams not to be evoked but by the magician's touch.

Here, too, we see another essential feature of romanticism—the visible person of the player. Beethoven stands already near enough to the romantics to make us feel thankful that his deafness made it impossible for him to become a travelling virtuoso. He wrote his thoughts down that others might interpret them. Liszt comes before the public himself to perform the act of creation.

So much exaggeration has been practised in writing about Liszt, whether by his admirers or his detractors, that it is difficult to analyse him dispassionately. Indeed to analyse dispassionately so passionate a personality seems almost blasphemous to either side. I confess that I find him far too fascinating as a subject for dissection for me to consider his music from an ethical standpoint. And it is most important that modern musicians and modern critics should study Liszt in this way, not merely because he is the foundation of modern pianoforte-playing and pianoforte composition, but also because his very shortcomings as a composer of real music make it comparatively easy for us to observe the technical principles underlying his method.¹ If he arouses no emotions in us, so much the better; we must study him as we study strict counterpoint, free from secondary distractions.

The first thing to note is the new conception of the pianoforte as a solo instrument in the grand manner. This is not due to Liszt alone, it is true, but Liszt is the most noteworthy representative of the public virtuoso type. The classical sonatas, from C. P. E. Bach onwards, had been written for domestic consumption; even the concertos, like the symphonies of that day, were more what we should class as chamber-music—indeed a concerto of C. P. E. Bach is a much quieter style of composition than the pianoforte quintets of Brahms or César Franck. Further, we must remember that the pianoforte had always been for obvious reasons the instrument of extemporization, an art which in classical times was constantly practised in public. Those who could not extemporize themselves could buy extemporizations ready-made by all the composers of the day—preludes, toccatas, fantasias, impromptus, to say nothing of fugues, for the fugue is above all others the ideal extemporary form—at any rate for those who have the requisite genius.

Secondly, let us consider the resources of the instrument itself. It is not necessary here to go into the history of successive

¹I refer not to the technique of pianoforte-playing but to the technique of composition for the pianoforte.

advantages in manufacture. The modern instrument, in spite of improvements in resonance, in action, in quality of tone, remains in fundamental principle the same as it was in Liszt's early days. A string is set in vibration by a hammer—an initial impact of a certain violence, followed by a gradual diminution of the sound. The violence of the initial impact can be adjusted exactly by the action of the finger on the key, and the range from soft to loud is, especially on a modern instrument, extremely wide. Whether it is possible, however, to alter the quality as apart from the intensity of any given note is a much-debated question. Pianists will probably say that there can be no doubt about it for a moment—have not the teachers catalogued and classified as many varieties of touch as there were smells in the streets of Cologne? Men of science, on the other hand, while admitting that the problem presents difficulties of great mathematical complexity, tend to think that the quality of a note cannot possibly be altered by any variety of touch.¹

“Good touch,” says Professor W. B. Norton² of Belfast, “consists in the power to produce fine gradations of intensity and in complete mastery of *legato* and the use of the pedal.” Mr. Spencer Pickering, F. R. S.,³ similarly maintains that the *apparent* difference of quality is due to varying intensity and length of one note as compared with other notes struck simultaneously or not, in the course of a piece of music. A further difference is due to pedalling.

It is in fact the right-hand pedal which gives the pianoforte an advantage possessed by no other instrument to any appreciable extent. A pianoforte without the pedal would be almost as limited in its effects as a violin without a bow. For the principal value of the pedal is not merely to sustain sounds when the finger for some reason is obliged to release the key, but to reinforce sounds by allowing other strings to vibrate in sympathy with them. To what extent and in what precise ways these sympathetic vibrations affect the “colour” of the pianoforte is a matter for acousticians to investigate: but it is hardly necessary to point out that even if the ear is a very unsafe guide in attempting to estimate qualities of sounds, it is none the less obvious that a rearrangement of the overtones by sympathetic reinforcement must necessarily have some considerable effect on the quality which these overtones produce.

¹See a very interesting correspondence on the subject of “Pianoforte Touch,” in *Nature*, May, June and July, 1913.

²*Nature*, 10 July, 1913.

³*Ibid.*, 31 July, 1913.

Professor G. H. Bryan, F. R. S.,¹ who is inclined to believe that difference of quality *is* obtainable by difference of touch, concludes his arguments with the very pointed remark that "the average pianoforte pupil has too much to do with learning execution to trouble about 'touch,' and very few professionals produce variations in the quality of their notes at all approaching the possible maximum."

The enormous importance of "touch" in pianoforte-playing is in fact only just beginning to be realized. There are, it is true, plenty of amateurs whose touch is agreeable enough to make up for other technical deficiencies; there are a fair number of professional pianists whose touch seldom offends. But there are very few indeed who possess a complete mastery over a really wide range of tone-quality, and make full use of this mastery as a means of intellectual interpretation. I venture to doubt whether Liszt himself realized its possibilities as they are realized by such a player as Ferruccio Busoni; Chopin, on the other hand, while confining himself to a much smaller field of pure technique, must have had an unparalleled sensitiveness to the values of delicate gradations.

Professor Bryan initiated the correspondence in *Nature*, from which I have quoted, in connexion with experiments on the pianola.² The pianola supplies one interesting test for the way in which different composers treat the pianoforte. A later correspondent found that, whereas the pianola could render Beethoven's sonatas "acceptably," it failed completely with the nocturnes and ballades of Chopin. To this I would add that Liszt is of all composers the one who is most effective on the pianola, and I venture to think that most people would be in fairly general agreement with these views. Now it is obviously absurd to suggest that Beethoven and Liszt are both greater composers than Chopin, and equally absurd to suggest the opposite. The pianola test has in fact nothing to do with the musical merits of the three, but applies solely to their methods of handling the pianoforte. The explanation is that, in the case of Beethoven, as I have suggested earlier, the musical thought is so completely independent of the means of presentation that it will dominate even a mediocre execution. With Liszt the handling of the instrument is so masterly that, even when delicacies of touch are ignored, the mere lay-out of the notes supplies an extra-

¹*Nature*, 8 May, 1913.

²I hope I may be permitted to use the word *pianola* to cover all mechanical pianoforte-players of the type.

ordinary variety of picturesque colour effects. Both Beethoven and Liszt in fact depend generally speaking on evenness and equality of touch, Beethoven because he accepts the pianoforte tone as the equivalent of the tone of other instruments, Liszt because the extreme simplicity of his musical idea allows him to design his colour effects in large patches, covering a whole phrase or more.

The inequalities of human performance may sometimes produce a pleasing play of light and shade on the regular texture of these broad surfaces, but there are indeed many cases where a perfect homogeneity of tone quality, such as is exceedingly difficult of achievement by a pianist, is positively demanded; e. g., in the quasi-geometrical patterns of the Variations on *Weinen, Klagen*. On the other hand, the ballades and nocturnes of Chopin, depending as they often do on an etherealized recollection of Bellini's arias, demand a more subtle delicacy of colour-gradation. "Complete command of all varieties of colour," says Sir Charles Stanford¹ with his invariable penetrating insight, "is the almost exclusive possession of the human voice." Liszt could seldom do more than *transcribe* Bellini; Chopin's genius *interprets* him. If we have ever heard the operas sung, Liszt can recall the singer to our imagination; Chopin goes further, makes us almost feel that not even Malibran herself could have suffused those tender melodies with an inspiration so enchanting.

Transcriptions were the principal works of Liszt's first period, and he remained a transcriber all his life. For if, as Busoni says, "notation is in itself the transcription of an abstract idea" and "again, the performance of a work is also a transcription," then surely pianoforte-music, more than any other kind of music, is transcription in its very essence. The Virginalists, Domenico Scarlatti, C. P. E. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven himself, were, as we have just seen, all of them transcribers when they sat down to their keyboards, and if Liszt has had to bear most of the bad reputation attaching to transcriptions, it is because he happened to be the prince of transcribers and a poor composer of original music. For even what he thought was original was in a sense transcription—either a transcription of non-musical ideas, or a transcription of musical ideas that already connoted certain definite associations—the typical romantic method—or of ideas which he may have thought were his own, but which were only his ideas about Schubert, Weber or Schumann. It makes no difference

¹*Musical Composition*, London, 1911.

whether he writes for the pianoforte or for the orchestra. Indeed his symphonic poems are pianoforte music even more than Schumann's symphonies are, for they are better planned for the pianoforte. Their orchestration is effective enough, but they almost always proclaim their pianoforte origin: the single bass note at the beginning of a bar, the other parts coming in after a quaver's rest, the long sustained chords *pianissimo* that vainly try to reproduce the effect of the pedal, the overwhelming predominance given to the harp—these are sufficient indications.

The musician who hates transcriptions has often good enough grounds for his hatred. A transcription is a commentary, just as much as an analytical programme; and he may reasonably say that it is an insult to his intelligence and his imagination. But commentaries are not all of them foolish, and if our serious musician is willing to listen to a lecture on Bach delivered in the ordinary way, why should he be indignant over a lecture on Bach that is played in Bach's own language—the normal language in fact of all musicians—music itself? Our serious musician may perhaps reply that he resents some comparatively simple and straightforward piece of old music being made to sound enormously elaborate and insuperably difficult to play. To this I would say that if a transcription sounds difficult it is either badly written or badly played. A really great artist makes the most complicated music sound clear, easy and natural—herein lies one of the best tests of good playing.¹

IV.

It is mainly from Liszt that the modern school of advanced pianoforte-music is descended. But the interrelation of modern pianoforte-writing with modern orchestration and modern harmony presents a complicated problem compared with which the unravelling of Liszt's own personality is simplicity itself. The pianoforte remains always the instrument of associations, and associations, like parasites, increase and multiply in all arts as time goes on, their birthrate being very considerably encouraged by modern facilities for popular dissemination.

The discords of modern harmony arise out of two main causes, first, the ruthless contrapuntal independence of part-writing, and secondly the acceptance of chords, dissonant and consonant alike, as effects of *timbre*. A mixture-stop in an organ

¹If my serious musician goes on to say that transcriptions of Bach's organ works only sound like a pianoforte duet in which the two performers cannot keep together, then I cordially agree with him.

sounds the common chord of every single note on the keyboard; but its general effect is one of *timbre* alone, without any conscious reference to harmony. We know that any single note may be split up into its component harmonics, and that *timbre* depends on the relative intensities of these; then why should we not construct new *timbres* synthetically, by sounding several notes together? If the organist may harmonize a melody in consecutive major thirds, fifths and octaves, why should not the pianist, or any one else, harmonize it in consecutive seconds, fourths, or sevenths? It amounts to no more than pulling out a different stop. The pianoforte is obviously the most practical instrument on which to try experiments of this kind, and so about 1887 there rises on the world of music that delightfully quaint and entertaining composer Erik Satie, followed by Debussy, Ravel, Leo Ornstein and others. And if even Gounod experimented with the device of "playing on the cracks"—i. e., striking seconds—in his charming little *Dodelinette*, why should we be taken aback when Busoni in his *Sonatina seconda* writes rapid scales in consecutive seconds? And who shall say that the pianoforte is not a labour-saving device when the same *Sonatina* opens with an effect for which Berlioz would have required two men at least, one to hold the cymbal by its strap and the other to beat on it with the *baguettes d'éponge*?

Modern composers are in fact realizing more fully than ever that the pianoforte, being a percussion instrument, is the best possible medium for which to transcribe the effects of other instruments of percussion. A clerical Second Empire produced Lefébure-Wély's *Les Cloches du Monastère*, and perhaps a future historian may connect up the unending tintinnabulations of the modern French and English school with the revival of plain-song and other mediævalisms. But these bells are not all church bells, nor are they the only noises that have passed into music. Alkan gave us a clever pianoforte picture of an express train—just such an absurd train as Erckmann-Chatrian described in the story of the blacksmith—and Vaughan Williams in the "London Symphony" has suggested the jingling carthorses on their way to Covent Garden and the skidding of motor-omnibuses in Piccadilly. Debussy's amusing *Minstrels* are a step nearer primæval barbarism than Alkan's *Le tambour bat aux champs*. The noisier our street life becomes, the more insistent is the need for musical sounds that can penetrate it, and it is exactly the instruments of percussion—bells, "sick giants" (I don't know what their trade name is, nor how they make the noise, but the effect is certainly percussive)

and street pianofortes—which force themselves most irresistibly on the unwilling ear. And so it is in the percussion department that the modern orchestra is most characteristic. It cannot make very much difference to an audience whether a composer uses a third hautboy or a cor anglais, a tuba or a bass trombone; but the harp, the xylophone, the glockenspiel, the celesta and the *timplipito* arrest attention at once. Moreover the attentive concert-goer will notice even in the treatment of wind and strings an increasing love of short sharp attacks rather than sustained tones. Bellini was accused of treating the orchestra as an overgrown guitar: is it not the tendency of modern composers to turn the orchestra into a monstrous pianoforte?

I do not in the least wish to quarrel with the tendencies of modern pianoforte music, considered as a thing by itself. On the contrary, it is certainly the modern composers who have best understood the instrument. To criticize their works as music would be beyond the scope of this paper. But it is clear that the modern treatment of the instrument demands generally, and may very likely demand more and more urgently, a standard of technique very far beyond the abilities of the average amateur. This is in some ways a positive advantage, because if the immense possibilities of the pianoforte are only to be exploited by those specialists who dedicate their lives to it, we may perhaps find amateurs giving up the pianoforte in despair and preferring to devote their attention to other means of making music. What the effect of the pianola on musical intelligence will be it is difficult to forecast. Under the hands and feet of a skilled operator it can produce an astonishingly successful imitation of a good player; but accomplished pianolists are almost as rare as accomplished pianists, and the average energetic and unintelligent manipulator is probably contributing disastrously towards the deadening of our nerves to the appreciation of finely graded tone. Moreover, the pianola suffers at present from the serious drawback that its mechanism for controlling the pedal necessarily hampers to some extent the use of precisely that device which as I have said before is the most essential advantage of the pianoforte, a device which in modern music demands an ever increasing skill and subtlety in the method of its employment. The pianola then, valuable as it may be for the popularization of all kinds of music, is more likely to intensify the evil effects of the pianoforte than to direct our taste towards the understanding of its true individuality.

The problem of the pianola and its influence may indeed well be one of the gravest importance in musical education and

appreciation. For as it is, the pianoforte already completely dominates practically the whole of modern music in one way or another. The tempered scale and its offshoot the whole-tone scale, so fiercely denounced by a certain school of teachers, are, I think, among the least of the evils which it has imposed upon us. Far worse is its tyranny of stress accent, leading inevitably to vulgarization of rhythm, to the acceptance of false values in quality of sound, to an indifference towards sustained melodic writing—and therefore *a fortiori* towards contrapuntal writing, since counterpoint consists in the combination of melodies—and, as a general result of all these things, to a dangerous atrophy of our power of *thinking in music*.

To overthrow this tyranny is impossible. We cannot send out emissaries into all parts of the earth to destroy every single pianoforte that exists. Even if we could, the musical antiquaries would be reconstructing them, not for general use of course, but for purposes of scientific investigation—"we must hear what this old music really sounded like on the original instruments for which it was intended!" There is only one remedy: we must give audiences something better. The unsophisticated are quite ready to accept it. It is ready to hand—it has always been so and always will be. It needed no invention: it was created for us. It is music itself, the first and only instrument. Will no one revive the lost art of singing?